

# Gadamer and the Authenticity of Openness

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**H**ubert Dreyfus has recently made a distinction between two types of resoluteness, and hence two types of authenticity, found in Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*.<sup>1</sup> The first he associates with the social virtuoso, Aristotle's *Phronemos*, while the second he associates with the cultural master, the world-creating individual. The distinction between these two types of authentic being-in-the-world may, in fact, serve to explain in part the radical divergence that has taken place between Heidegger's self-proclaimed followers in the Continental tradition. While thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty have inherited the ideal of the strong poet, the world-defining individual, others have embraced the more Aristotelian account, concentrating on our practical situatedness in the world.<sup>2</sup>

The work of Hans-Georg Gadamer has all too often been associated with that of the former, subjecting him to the associated charges of subjectivism and relativism. However, it is here that Dreyfus' distinction becomes important, for Gadamer's thought is much more closely related to the Aristotelian side of Heidegger than it is to the pernicious, Nietzschean side. More specifically, Dreyfus' formulation of the Aristotelian form of authenticity found in Heidegger can help us to understand how Gadamer's notion of openness, a frequently misunderstood concept, functions within his philosophical hermeneutics. The purpose of this paper will thus be to explore the authenticity of openness, the sense in which Gadamer's conception of openness entails a notion of authenticity that is directly connected to practical, ethical concerns. In the end, this project will require that we relate openness to ethics, in a Socratic sense, as a shared striving towards the good. Gadamer states in the "Preface to the

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First Edition" of his first major work, *Plato's Dialectical Ethics*, "I do not assert that Plato's 'ethics' is dialectical; rather, I ask whether and in what way Plato's dialectic is 'ethics'" (xxv). In a similar vein, I will here make a gesture towards explaining how Gadamer's advocacy of openness, as a call to authenticity, may in fact constitute an ethics.

Gadamer's project in *Truth and Method* is from the start an obviously epistemological one, concerned with outlining the conditions of possibility for all understanding. Integral to this endeavor is his analysis of the forestructure of understanding. Following Heidegger, Gadamer holds that all understanding is predicated upon a pregiven set of meanings and purposes that we bring along with us into every attempt to understand. We continually bring pregiven prejudices to bear on the situations in which we find ourselves, these prejudices helping to determine all understanding. In fact, these prejudices are wholly necessary in that they enable any understanding at all. In understanding an historical text, we each bring our own personal horizon consisting of our meanings and purposes into contact with the historical horizon of the text in an endeavor to fuse those horizons in the event of understanding. Understanding, as an event, has the structure of a dialogue between our hermeneutical situation and the text or tradition that we seek to understand. Gadamer thus rescues prejudice from the Enlightenment's "prejudice against prejudice" in order to highlight the fact that those prejudices the Enlightenment viewed as distorting and negative are in fact required for any real dialogue to take place. For Gadamer, we are continually caught up in the dynamics of the hermeneutic circle such that all understanding involves a fusion of the part that is the text with the whole of our background in a tradition of meanings and purposes.

In this sense, the dialogical structure of understanding dictates that understanding reaches its fullest potential only when it is also a self-understanding. All understanding requires an application to our specific historical situation. In fact, application is necessary for any fusion of horizons, for any real dialogue, to take place.<sup>3</sup> Application thus becomes the key to saving the truth of the humanities from the shackles of scientific methodology. It is the application of whatever it is we wish to understand,

the universal, to our present situation, the particular, that works to comprise the dialogic structure of understanding. Application thus involves a mediation of the universal and the particular that in fact determines both, a basic statement of the hermeneutic circle. "[I]t explicitly and consciously bridges the temporal distance that separates the interpreter from the text and overcomes the alienation of meaning that the text has undergone" (*Truth and Method*, TM, 311). It is through the dialogical encounter of the interpreter and the text that both come into their true being as they are synthesized amidst the understanding of the subject matter that rises up between them.

A hermeneutics based on the notion of application is, in this sense, intimately connected to many of the concerns of Aristotelian ethics. Gadamer claims that the dynamics of application, and indeed of hermeneutics in general, are modeled in Aristotle's conception of *phronesis*. *Phronesis* is Aristotle's formulation of moral knowledge, knowledge based on the correct application of reason to moral action. In fact, Aristotle's conception of moral knowledge is very different from any form of knowledge derived from methodological concerns due to the fact that, in the moral (applied) sphere, method is in fact determined by the object itself.<sup>4</sup> The peculiar fact of moral knowledge is that it *is* only as it is applied; it is necessarily connected to the particular situation in which it is applied and, inasmuch as the situation is in part determined by the nature of the one who is in it, to the very being of the moral agent.<sup>5</sup>

The remaining possibility, then, is that intelligence is a state grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about what is good or bad for a human being. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 6.43)

It is important to note that Gadamer considers a hermeneutics governed by the notion of application to function in the same way. All understanding necessarily involves an application to the particular situation in which the interpreter is called to participate. The knowledge arising out of understanding is thus formally akin to moral knowledge. Its purpose is to say something about the engaged situation in which we find ourselves, not to

contemplate in a state of detached neutrality a purely objective reality. Understanding is in fact something that *occurs* to us.<sup>6</sup>

Gadamer goes on to elucidate the occurrence of understanding by claiming that it has the structure of an experience (*Erfahrung*) and is thus an epistemologically basic concept.<sup>7</sup> The activity of understanding consists of the dialogue in which we take part. This dialogue, motivated by the aspect of application, seeks to reconcile the foreignness of the historical horizon of the text with the situation of the interpreter. Understanding of the subject matter grows up in between this dialogue and has the structure of an experience (*Erfahrung*). It is something that speaks to us, affects us, and moves us in certain directions. Gadamer thus claims that experience is essentially negative, futural, and constitutive of openness. It is negative in that it tells us something that is other from us or in some sense objective. It is futural in that it projects a sense of expectations of what will occur in the future. And it is constitutive of openness in that it reveals something to us about our situation that opens us to reality, namely our radical finitude.

These three moments of experience are in fact a reflection of the to and fro motion of Gadamer's conception of dialogue, and hence of the very structure of understanding itself. The negativity of experience is a reflection of the recognition of the Other, of the historical horizon of the text that speaks to us from outside of our own situation. Still, this Other is essentially tied to us as a Thou.<sup>8</sup> The negativity of experience is thus productive in that it not only says something, but it says something *to* us that has a meaning *for* us. What it says, as something that is essentially applied, pushes us into future possibilities. Being pushed as such, we are forced to realize our own inherent limitations. We are creatures always striving to understand but never able to fully bridge the gap between our knowledge and the call of the real.

The truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience. That is why a person who is called experienced has become so not only *through* experiences but is also open *to* new experiences . . . the experienced person proves to be . . .

someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself. (TM, 355, italics his)

The realization of our essential finitude thus cultivates a sense of openness in that it forces us to pay ever-increasing attention to the real, that which is disclosed through genuine thinking. This is actually the true purpose of the dialectic of experience as Gadamer conceives it, for openness is itself a condition of understanding. Only if we are prepared to accept something that is against us can understanding, as a fusion of horizons, occur at all. The experienced person is open to further experiences and thus open to understanding itself. The virtue of the experienced person is thus not that she knows, but that she is open to knowing, that she has the peculiar ability to reach an understanding over and over again in a variety of different circumstances.

It will be helpful here to relate Gadamer's conception of openness to Heidegger's discussion of authenticity. Though it may not be obvious at first glance, it is my contention that there is a real sense in which Gadamer's advocacy of openness is a call for us to become authentic, to real-ize our Situation.<sup>9</sup> This becomes especially apparent when one takes into account the distinction Dreyfus has made between the Aristotelian and Kierkegaardian forms of authenticity present in *Being and Time*. For the Aristotelian Heidegger, the resolute real-ization of our unique Situation that constitutes authenticity is not a *conscious* recognition of the structure of our being-in-the-world. Rather, it involves a radical opening of ourselves to being moved into action by the Situation. As Dreyfus quotes from a 1953 lecture of Heidegger's:

The essence of resoluteness (*Ent-schlossenheit*) lies in the opening (*Ent-borgenheit*) of human Dasein into the clearing of being, and not at all in a storing

up of energy for "action" . . . Its relation to being is one of letting-be. (Dreyfus, 1991, 318)

The resoluteness of authenticity is in no way an intentionalistic phenomenon oriented toward any specific form of action. Rather, the facing up to guilt that is the hallmark of authenticity here involves a giving ourselves over.<sup>10</sup> Authenticity involves a recognition of our being thrown into a world of meanings and purposes that are not strictly our own. This, in turn, opens us to that world, giving us the ability to truly take it up. Our openness to this world is thus truly consecrated in terms of active participation rather than detached knowledge.

The phenomenon set forth with the term *resoluteness* can hardly be confused with an empty "*habitus*" and an indefinite "*velleity*." Resoluteness does not first represent and acknowledge a situation to itself, but has already placed itself in it. Resolute, Da-sein is already *acting* . . . *But resoluteness is only the authenticity of care itself, cared for in care and possible as care.* (*Being and Time*, BT, 300, italics his)

The openness to the Situation that authenticity demands is neither a purely practical nor a purely theoretical affair. Rather, it is connected to the very being of Dasein itself as a recognition of its basis in care,<sup>11</sup> a recognition that one does not 'have' but actually 'does' by acting, by resolutely taking up the projects our culture and tradition hand over to us. The projects we take up authentically are in fact indistinguishable from those we take up inauthentically. It is rather the self-consciousness with which we take up those projects that distinguishes authenticity.

For Heidegger, the transformation to authenticity signals a transformation in the *form* of my everyday activity, leaving the *content* unchanged. I enact my authenticity in all my absorbed involved activity . . . The transformation to owning up to Dasein's nullity is, of course, the same transforma-

tion we have already described as becoming open to the Situation. (Dreyfus, 1991, 322)

Thus, in responding to the concrete Situation the resolute individual is recognized as a model; not of what *general* thing to do, but of *how* to respond in an especially appropriate way. (Dreyfus, 1999, 12)

What is definitive of resoluteness is not the *content* of activity or even a general *method* of acting. Rather, resoluteness involves the ability to respond to the situation *appropriately, correctly*, whatever that may be. Heidegger's Aristotelian formulation of authenticity thus amounts to a giving oneself over to openness in such a way as to engage oneself in thinking. Of course, this is not the end of the story for Heidegger. He goes on from here to discuss the authenticity involved in *anticipatory* resoluteness towards death, a much more Christian resoluteness that requires a primordial understanding of Dasein itself. This understanding of Dasein then makes possible a distinct transformation of self and world that is exemplified in the cultural master, someone who is able to take up marginal practices present in one's cultural past in such a way as to disclose a truly new world. However, as Dreyfus notes, Heidegger is never able to fully synthesize these two notions of authenticity, leaving his account of resoluteness somewhat ambiguous.<sup>12</sup>

I believe, despite the fact that Gadamer never refers to authenticity as such in his writings, possibly in order to avoid the implications of Heidegger's Kierkegaardian account, that we can gain a better understanding of his conception of openness by relating it to Heidegger's Aristotelian account of authenticity as I have outlined it here. The hermeneutic call to openness should be read as a natural outgrowth of the nature of understanding. Guided by the principle of application, all understanding is something that occurs to us and has the structure of an experience. Understanding is dialogical. Its essential negativity, its experience of the Other, continually reveals to itself its own finitude, thus opening it to further experience, experience of the real.

Thus experience is experience of human finitude. The truly experienced person is one who has taken this to heart, who knows that he is master neither of time nor the future. The experienced man knows that all foresight is limited and all plans uncertain. In him is realized the true value of experience . . . Experience teaches us to acknowledge the real. The genuine result of experience, then—as of all desire to know—is to know what is. (TM, 357)

Just as Heidegger's social virtuoso has faced guilt in such a way as to resolutely take up the projects of tradition, the truly experienced person, for Gadamer, has accepted the radical finitude of the human situation in such a way as to become open to the truth of the real as it is revealed in genuine understanding. What distinguishes the person who is guided by openness is thus not what one does generally, but rather the appropriateness of one's response to each particular situation. As a condition of understanding, openness is exemplified in each particular event of understanding. The open person is thus the one who understands most readily, just as Heidegger's social virtuoso is the one who is simply able to respond appropriately to the Situation.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, Gadamer's account of openness *cannot* be something that guides us in our endeavor to understand generally. Openness is simply a condition of every particular understanding qua understanding and can't be abstracted to the point of a guiding principle or method.

Admittedly, Gadamer's seeming *advocation* of openness often appears to have a pseudo-methodological intent. It is for this reason that many of his critics have labeled him a conservative, claiming his call to openness with regard to the way in which we approach language and tradition bars us from being able to adequately criticize those institutions. Yet, our discussion of openness here has led us to the conclusion that it is simply a condition of authentic understanding. Like Heidegger's Aristotelian conception of authenticity, it is not a general ideal with which we can approach texts, traditions, other people, etc., but rather an instance of every appropriate understanding. This in-



terpretation also has the advantage of taking seriously Gadamer's fervent insistence that he is merely describing what takes place in every genuine understanding. As he boldly states in the "Forward to the Second Edition" of *Truth and Method*, "My real concern was and is philosophic: not with what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing" (xxvii). How then do we account for Gadamer's seeming advocacy of openness?

It is my contention that Gadamer's call to openness, as a condition of every genuine understanding, is in fact an ethics. In his first major work, *Plato's Dialectical Ethics*, Gadamer claims that Platonic dialectic, as a shared striving towards the good, in fact coincides with Socratic ethics. He thus focuses on the form of the Platonic dialogues, noting that the inquiry into any particular subject matter that takes place there also functions in such a way as to bring the inquirers into their ownmost being-in-themselves and being-together. This he connects to the "positive" function of Socratic refutation, the bringing about of a shared search for an agreement with oneself and with others that is both a means to and the leading instance of the good. What we learn through dialectic, and thus through understanding in its most basic sense, is not merely the subject matter involved, but the basic being-with that constitutes Dasein's existential structure.

This general sense of dialectic as man's giving an accounting regarding the existential possibilities to which he lays claim and regarding his claim to knowledge of entities in general makes dialectic important, at the same time, in a way that reaches beyond each particular object of investigation and accounting: it makes us, in general, "more dialectical," by grasping the possibility (which is inherent in human existence) of understanding ourselves and of justifying the claim to knowledge wherever it is made. (PDE, 100)

We noted earlier that the true purpose of the dialectic of experience is the recognition of our own human finitude. The distinguishing feature of the experienced person is the willingness to

accept something that is against oneself in such a way as to be able to understand. Though this cannot amount to a method of understanding due to the fact that openness is simply a condition of every genuine understanding, it can be viewed as an ethics, as a way of relating to others and to the world, in short, as a way of making us "more dialectical."

This ethics admittedly functions somewhat behind the scenes in *Truth and Method*. Still, it constitutes a major concern in both Gadamer's earlier and later writings. Indeed, as Bernstein has noted, there is a latent radical strain present in Gadamer's work that pulls us toward the notions of freedom and solidarity.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Gadamer considers his philosophical hermeneutics to function as a corrective to the expansion and domination of technology and planning reason.

The hermeneutic consciousness, which must be awakened and kept awake, recognizes that in the age of science philosophy's claim of superiority has something chimerical and unreal about it. But though the will of man is more than ever intensifying its criticism of what has gone before to the point of becoming a utopian or eschatological consciousness, the hermeneutic consciousness seeks to confront that will with something of the truth of remembrance: with what is still and ever again real. (TM, xxxvii)

The basis of this corrective is in fact the ethics associated here with openness. If we heed the call to openness, we will then be in a position to recognize our finitude, and hence those things that are against us, not in such a way as to methodically facilitate understanding in general, but rather in order to come into our true being-with-others. Dialectic, here, is truly an ethics in that only through dialogical understanding, and the openness this presupposes, do we arrive at a genuine relationship with the world, with others, and with ourselves.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Could anything be more Intelligible than Everyday Intelligibility?:"

Reinterpreting Division I of *Being and Time* in the light of Division II." (Paper presented at the Inaugural Meeting of the International Society for Phenomenological Studies, Asilomar, California, July 19-23, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> See also Charles Taylor's distinction between authenticity (A) and authenticity (B) in his *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991, 66).

<sup>3</sup> "In the process of understanding, a real fusing of horizons occurs—which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded. To bring about this fusion in a regulated way is the task of what we called historically effected consciousness. Although this task was obscured by aesthetic-historical positivism following on the heels of romantic hermeneutics, it is, in fact, the central problem of hermeneutics. It is the problem of *application*, which is to be found in all understanding" (TM, 307).

<sup>4</sup> "As we see, the problem of method is entirely determined by the object—a general Aristotelian principle—and the important thing for us is to examine more closely the relation between moral being and moral consciousness that Aristotle sets out in his *Ethics*" (TM, 313).

<sup>5</sup> "For moral knowledge, as Aristotle describes it, is clearly not objective knowledge—i.e., the knower is not standing over against a situation that he merely observes; he is directly confronted with what he sees. It is something that he has to do" (TM, 314).

<sup>6</sup> "*For the hermeneutical problem too is clearly distinct from 'pure' knowledge detached from any particular kind of being*" (TM, 314, italics his).

<sup>7</sup> "This is precisely what we have to keep in mind in analyzing historically effected consciousness: it has the structure of an *experience* (*Erfahrung*)" (TM, 346).

<sup>8</sup> "Thus the negativity of experience has a curiously productive meaning. It is not simply that we see through a deception and hence make a correction, but we acquire a comprehensive knowledge. We cannot, therefore, have a new experience of any object at random, but it must be of such a nature that we gain better knowledge through it, not only of itself, but of what we thought we knew before—i.e., of a universal. The negation by means of which it achieves this is a determinate negation. We call this kind of experience *dialectical*" (TM, 353).

<sup>9</sup> For Heidegger, Situation, as opposed to everyday situation, refers to our authentic 'place' within the temporal structure of being-in-the-world. It is important to note that having such a Situation is predicated on resoluteness. Situation is not something we all have and must simply recognize. Actually, the existential attributes of a resolute Da-sein create Situation in the first place (BT, 299-300).

<sup>10</sup> “*Ent-schlossenheit*, then, is the openness that results from acceptance of the breakdown of the ethical illusion of lucid total choice, and the realization that the self is impotent and empty. It is therefore misleading to call the change choosing to choose. Dasein does not choose at all. Rather, Dasein as a disclosing way of being accepts the *call* to acknowledge its essential empty openness” (Dreyfus, 1991, 318).

<sup>11</sup> The concept of care, for Heidegger, encompasses the existential whole of Da-sein’s ontological structure (BT, 193).

<sup>12</sup> “It is hard to reconcile this claim that *only anticipatory* resoluteness reveals Dasein authentically and fully with the claim in the earlier discussion of the resoluteness of facing guilt that ‘we have now arrived at that truth of Dasein which is most primordial because it is *authentic*.’ (343) I think Heidegger was simply confused as to how he wanted to relate the two kinds of resoluteness” (Dreyfus, 1999, 26).

<sup>13</sup> “The Situation cannot be calculated in advance or presented like something occurrent which is waiting for someone to grasp it. It only gets disclosed in free resolving which has not been determined beforehand but is open to the possibility of such determination” (BT, 355).

<sup>14</sup> See Bernstein, Richard. “What is the Difference that Makes a Difference? Gadamer, Habermas, and Rorty.” In *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*. Brice R. Wachterhauser, ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986, 343-376.)

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